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PRESS CLIPPINGS

Office of Program Resources Management

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March 23, 2008

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INVESTING IN PEOPLE

(Education)

Inquirer Mindanao

Minor offenders get timely help from academy

By Aquiles Zonio

(Source: Philippine Daily Inquirer News Online – 3/23/08)

GENERAL SANTOS CITY, Philippines—He came to General Santos City a year ago. Giovanni Peralta, then an underage, lied about his real age so he could secure documents in applying for work.

Luckily, he was hired as a utility worker in one of the multinational firms based in the seaport city.

The third child in a brood of 12, Giovanni, now 18, had a hard row to hoe back in his poor community in Tampakan, South Cotabato.

He had only one thing in mind—to escape the gnawing poverty—when he bade goodbye to family, playmates and friends.

Just a few days after getting the job, he and his friends figured in a fracas while attending a fiesta celebration. They were charged with robbery with attempted homicide.

Only the timely intervention of the city social welfare and development office saved the day for him.

Turning point

Instead of being put behind bars, he was brought to a Marist-run Marcellin Academy, a home for street children and other minor offenders. It was to become the turning point in his young life.

Giovanni underwent values formation, was sent back to school and, most importantly, was given the rare opportunity of undergoing a training on welding skills.

Back home, Giovanni recalled, he could not finish schooling due to poverty. His parents mainly depended on farming for livelihood and could hardly afford to send all the 12 children to school.

He was beaming with pride and excitement when he said he was going to graduate from elementary school on March 17.

Through the help of Chevron, US Agency for International Development (USAID), Consuelo Reyes Foundation, International Youth Foundation and Marcellin Academy, 39 out-of-school youths, children in conflict with the law, and out-of-school adults graduated from a 160-hour-long training on welding in October last year.

Fr. Crispin Betita, who is also the executive director of the Marcellin Foundation, said the community-based training was conducted twice a week.

“The program was conceived to equip these minors and young adults with life skills. The actual training on welding was only 120 hours, but we add up 40-hour sessions on values formation. Life skills alone without proper values can hardly make them successful,” Betita said.

Of the 39 trainees, six, including Giovanni, had been minor offenders. A skilled welder at the age of 18, Giovanni plans to continue schooling while waiting for the resolution of his case.

Overseas job

An overseas job opportunity knocked early at his door. “Somebody came here, a representative of a legitimate work placement agency, who wants to hire Giovanni for an overseas job,” Betita revealed.

Giovanni, according to Betita, was very excited to grab the offer. Unfortunately, he still has a pending case with the court and unless this is resolved, he could not go abroad.

He, however, was very optimistic that he could hurdle the legal obstacle. “It wasn’t our fault. He started the brawl and we just reacted. We’re just happy that the

complainant has not been attending the case hearing. It seems, he's no longer interested. We hope and pray, we'll be exonerated," he said in the vernacular.

Giovanni's fervent dream is to get an overseas job so he can support his schooling, including his family.

Right after graduation, Betita bared, 30 of the 39 graduates were hired by fishing magnate Doming Teng for on-the-job training (OJT) with free transportation and P212 per day stipend each.

"One of the OJTs, who is a CICL (child in conflict with the law) didn't know what to do after receiving his first salary. What he did was to give his salary to his mother. It's heartening to know that we were able to change the outlook and rekindle hope in the hearts of these former minor offenders," Betita said.